



Breaking Bad News

Animation: Breaking Bad News: Sudden Death

Policeman:

I was on duty the night of the accident, so it fell to me to be the one to give the bad news. I've done it many times before, but it's something you never really get used to.

We do get some training – but doing it in role-play sessions is nothing like the real thing.

I always try to work out what to say beforehand, but then you have to play it by ear because you don't know how people will react so I have some key principles that I follow. You give them time to brace themselves – it's called a shot across the bows – then you need to be really clear in what you say and make sure they've understood.

With Rosie's mum – it was hard because she was on her own. Seeing me at the door's a pretty big hint that something awful's happened – and I could see the fear in her eyes. I'm a dad myself and I can't imagine how terrible it would be to hear that your child's been killed. But, it is not about me and what I feel – I have to be there to break the news and give support.

I checked that she was Rosie's mum and asked if I could come in – telling her then that it was very bad news. It just gives people a few seconds to gather themselves – for the sake of their dignity. When I told her that Rosie was dead, I made sure I used the 'd' word - people don't want to believe it and so you have to be really clear. We were taught in training that you can't soften it by using another word for death – you can confuse people. I've noticed on the medical soaps how they often say things like, 'we did everything we could but failed to save her'. They don't always add the fact that she's dead.

Then I wait to see the reaction – Rosie's mum just sobbed and it felt right to put a hand on her shoulder. I can usually sense if people don't want to be touched – but to me it is about compassion. It is tricky, because of being a bloke – my wife who's a midwife would just have hugged her – but there are boundaries we have to respect.

I think I cried, too – and that felt OK. I don't always react like that – but somehow this just got to me. Seeing someone else's pain is hard but you have to stay with it and not try to pretend you can make it better. So another rule for me is to keep quiet and wait.

People usually ask how someone died – they want reassurance they didn't suffer - and they often ask if they said anything. So I had to be prepared and know the details before I went to see Mrs. Brown.

I remember she was desperate to be with Rosie, so I took her to the hospital. I rang ahead so they could get her ready to be seen. Sometimes, if they have facial injuries or burns, it is difficult – but we still find ways to help them to see their child if that's what they want.